

Christopher to Pressure Syria To Block Cargo to Hezbollah

U.S. Wants Arms Shipments to Lebanon Via Damascus to Be Stopped

By R. Jeffrey Smith
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Secretary of State Warren Christopher plans next week to press the Syrian government anew to bar access to Iranian cargo planes laden with arms for Islamic Party of God, or Hezbollah, militants in southern Lebanon, U.S. officials said yesterday.

The decision to request the Syrian action stems from U.S. intelligence assessments that most if not all of the rockets and other arms being used against Israeli forces during this week's fighting were ferried to Hezbollah forces by truck from the Damascus airport, the officials said.

They said the Iranian arms were delivered to the airport before the routine Israeli skirmishes with Hezbollah forces erupted into a major exchange of fire last Monday. The deliveries have been made by clearly marked Iran Air planes, including Boeing 747s adapted for carrying cargo, in flights occurring between one and four times a month for several years, the officials said.

"It's been like a regularly scheduled flight," said one official privy to classified intelligence reports on the shipments. "You can watch the planes land and unload."

Included in some of the shipments are the Katyusha rockets and Sagger anti-tank missiles that have alarmed Israeli forces and prompted Israeli citizens to flee to bomb shelters, U.S. officials said.

"There are more deadly weapons, heavier weapons, in much larger quantities . . . arriving through Syria," a senior U.S. official said. "We have been actively cautioning the Syrians before this crisis started . . . [and Christopher] has been on the phone with the Syrian foreign minister three times in the last four days over the issue of the weaponry."

The United States has known about the Iranian arms pipeline through Syria to Hezbollah for years. A public U.S. government report in April hinted at the shipments by noting that Syria "continues to provide support . . . to groups that engage in international terrorism," including Hezbollah,

without detailing what was involved.

But the administration sought this week to avoid any new public comment about Syria's longstanding role as Christopher prepared for a trip to the Middle East next week and privately implored the Syrians not to allow any immediate resupply of Hezbollah, officials said.

"I'm afraid that the subjects you raised . . . are ones that we would have to talk about in executive session," CIA Director R. James Woolsey told Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.) on Wednesday, when Lantos asked about reports he had received of

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the shipments. Woolsey was speaking at a hearing of the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on international security, which Lantos heads.

Past U.S. complaints about the Iran Air flights have been rebuffed by authorities in Damascus. But U.S. officials said Christopher, whose principal mission during his trip is to promote progress in regional peace negotiations, plans to emphasize that fighting provoked by any rearmament of Hezbollah partisans could seriously undermine those talks.

U.S. officials theorize that Syria periodically permits the arms shipments in the belief that a well-armed Hezbollah helps to put pressure on Israel in peace negotiations.

No Iranian flights carrying arms appear to have landed at the airport in the past week, U.S. officials said, explaining that Syria evidently has heeded U.S. requests that it cut off Hezbollah's access to help force a cease-fire. President Clinton praised Syria on Tuesday for displaying what he called "commendable restraint" during the fighting, without explaining exactly what prompted his remark.

Israeli diplomats in Washington have called attention to the arming of Hezbollah in conversations with U.S. lawmakers this week, citing them as a partial justification for their employment of substantial military force during the fighting.

More than 155 Katyusha rockets and an undetermined number of Sagger anti-tank missiles were expended by Hezbollah forces in attacks against Israel this week, while Israel fired more than 10,000 artillery shells into southern Lebanon in an effort to force an exodus of Hezbollah members or sympathizers by demolishing entire villages.

The Katyusha is a crude, short-range rocket of Soviet design that measures roughly 12 feet in length; if necessary, it can be fired by launchers cobbled together from large pieces of wood scrap. Shells for it are manufactured by many countries, including Iran, which also purchased many Katyusha from North Korea for use during its war with Iraq between 1980 and 1988.

"The Third World is flooded with them," said one U.S. government expert.

The Sagger, which was blamed in the death of at least one Israeli soldier this week, is a Soviet-designed, guided anti-tank missile that can be fired from ground or mobile launchers. Egyptian forces used them against Israel during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, but they apparently have been used by Hezbollah for only the past year or so.

"You can buy them from any gray-market arms dealers," the U.S. expert said. Iran purchased armored personnel carriers equipped with Sagger missiles in the 1970s.

Staff writer Ann Devroy contributed to this report.